

# Cancer survivor rejoins Air Force Band

by Airman 1st Class Alex Salekoff

BOLLING AIR FORCE BASE, D.C. — At Air Force Band headquarters, his locker remained just the way he left it three years ago. Inside the locker were performance uniforms starched and pressed, ready for another gig at the private residence of the vice president, laundry ready for the dry cleaners, a bottle of shampoo and his favorite, though dirty, personal coffee mug.

It was a sight that provoked emotion for Master Sgt. **Mitchell Morton**, a pianist with the band, who, after being medically retired in August 2001, recently rejoined the band on active duty.

"It was as if [fellow band members] knew I would return one day," Sergeant Morton said. "They tell me it became known as the 'Mitch Morton Memorial Locker.'"

Because of the "shrine," even Airmen new to the band recognize his name, he said. Many of them had heard the story of how one summer afternoon, during a church softball game, Sergeant Morton collided with another player and was rushed to a hospital with a mild concussion. Routine tests revealed a massive amount of blood collecting in his brain, indicating that his injuries were more serious than previously thought. Continued testing revealed that he had a type of blood disease — a rare form of leukemia.

The sergeant had acute promyelocytic leukemia, or "APL," which is the rapid accumulation of abnormal white blood cells in the bone marrow and the blood, resulting in anemia, bleeding and susceptibility to infection.

According to clinical studies, about 10 percent of leukemia patients have this form of cancer. Even with standard chemotherapy plus a vitamin A-based treatment, less than 80 percent of patients survive more than five years.

"The chemo was the right one for the disease, but it was the wrong one for my body," said Sergeant Morton, who suffered an uncommon allergic reaction to the treatment that landed him in the hospital's intensive care unit.

In fact, at one point, doctors counseled his family that death was imminent.

"It might have been at this point that



**Master Sgt. Mitchell Morton performs** with the U.S. Air Force Band's Silver Wings. He recently returned to service after battling leukemia.

the request went out to the band stating that [Sergeant Morton] needed platelets," said fellow band member Senior Master Sgt. **Angela Williams**.

Sergeant Morton survived the night, prompting his doctors to take a chance on an alternative, yet experimental form of treatment. Considered to be an ideal candidate for this new remedy because of his initial reaction to the chemotherapy, he immediately underwent arsenic trioxide treatment, becoming the first military member to receive it.

Recently approved by the Federal Drug Administration, this unique form of cancer therapy has become the No. 1 new treatment for APL.

Nearly three months after his initial emergency room visit, Sergeant Morton

was released from the hospital to begin his new life as a civilian. His final arsenic treatment was administered in April 2004, and though he was feeling better, he felt like there was something missing in his life.

Until the day he came across an article in the band's newsletter, "Cadenza," on the rebirth of Silver Wings, the band's country and western ensemble. Now, officially back on active duty, Sergeant Morton said his comeback has had its share of frustration and red tape, but, overall, he's excited.

"God has a funny way of getting your attention sometimes," he said, "whether you believe in him or not."

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